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# JOSEPH SMITH, ROMANTICISM, AND TRAGIC CREATION

*Terryl L. Givens*

JOSEPH SMITH, AS I THINK HISTORIANS readily recognize, has much to commend him as a Romantic thinker. Personal freedom was as sacred to him as to the young Schiller, his emphasis on individualism invites comparison with Byron and Emerson, his view of restoration as inspired syncretism is the religious equivalent of Friedrich Schlegel's "progressive universal poetry," his hostility to dogma and creeds evokes Blake's cry, "I must create my own system or be enslaved by another man's," and his celebration of human innocence and human potential transform into theology what Rousseau and Goethe had merely plumbed through the novel and the drama. Even his teachings on preexistence were in line with kindred views of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Goethe—all of whose meditations on preexistence can be seen as variations of what philosopher Charles Taylor considers Romanticism's great moral innovation: "We are called to live up to our originality," because each being is "capable of [radical] self-articulation."<sup>1</sup> But true human authenticity, of course, must be grounded in an

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cam-

existence that is uncreated and eternal, which is why Joseph, like the Romantics, found the necessary basis of human originality and self-articulation in premortal life. Only thereby could Joseph the Romantic affirm humans as one of what he called “the three independent principles” of the universe.<sup>2</sup>

But there are strains in Joseph Smith that seem utterly incompatible with the essence of Romanticism. Joseph was—and there seems no way around this—an uncompromising legalist. Personally, I have found this the most vexing and incongruous dimension to Joseph the man, the prophet, and the theologian. A legalistic vocabulary dominated his religious thought: Authority, priesthood, laws, and ordinances were everything. “There is no salvation,” he declared, “without a legal administrator.” That title he applied to Zachariah, John, and even Jesus Christ;<sup>3</sup> the prophet is whoever holds “keys,” and the exact “order and ordinances of the Kingdom” were non-negotiable, set in stone “by the Priesthood in the council of heaven before the world was.”<sup>4</sup> In Oliver Cowdery’s 1834 version of Mormonism’s articles of faith, he wrote: “We believe that God is the same in all ages; and that it requires the same holiness, purity, and religion, to save a man now, as it did anciently.”<sup>5</sup> In Joseph’s final version, that belief drops out, to be replaced by “a man must be called of God . . . by the laying on hands, by those who are in authority, to . . . administer in the ordinances” of the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

Months before Joseph died, his reliance on such legal power climaxed in a shocking invocation of form and authority over either God’s grace or personal virtue: “If you have power to seal on earth & in heaven then we should be Crafty, the first thing you do go & seal on

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bridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 375.

<sup>2</sup>William Clayton’s Private Book, May 16, 1841, in Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Books, 1991), 74.

<sup>3</sup>James Burgess, Notebook, July 23, 1843, in *ibid.*, 235.

<sup>4</sup>Franklin D. Richards, “Scriptural Items,” in *ibid.*, 215.

<sup>5</sup>“Address,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 1 (October 1834): 2.

<sup>6</sup>Joseph Smith, “Church History,” in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith. Volume 1: Autobiographical and Historical Writings* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 436-37.

earth your sons & daughters unto yourself, & yourself unto your fathers in eternal glory, & go ahead and not go back, but use a little Craftiness & seal all you can. . . . I will walk through the gate of heaven and Claim what I seal & those that follow me and my council.”<sup>7</sup> He sounds here as if he is prepared to out-lawyer St. Peter himself.

This is the seeming inconsistency at the heart of Joseph Smith that I want to examine today. Is there a way to make sense of these fiercely opposed tendencies in Joseph’s gospel vision? I am hoping that a broad vision of his era might help. I propose to set the stage for this conversation about Joseph Smith with what I consider the two most momentous intellectual innovations of the eighteenth century, one by William Herschel and one by Edmund Burke. And I want to position Joseph as a prophet caught up in, and yet resisting, certain developments called Romanticism in his contemporary cultural milieu. In spite of my focus on intellectual contexts, I am not going to make any claims about derivation, or influence, for two reasons. First, in Joseph’s own conception of prophetic vocation, he emphatically resists facile notions of originality or intellectual theft. His words make clear, I believe, that he considered restoration a process of inspired eclecticism and assimilation. And second, as Lord Acton said, “Few discoveries are more irritating than those which expose the pedigree of an idea.”<sup>8</sup> I set the stage, rather, that we may have a fuller appreciation of how Joseph’s religious conceptions represented a particularly prescient engagement with the shifting currents of his day.

In 1789, as revolutionaries in France were reshaping the political order, the leading astronomer of the age, William Herschel, was shifting the cosmic paradigm. His paper on “The Construction of the Heavens,” published by the Royal Society in 1785, effected a change in the Western world’s cosmic vision more dramatic than Copernicus’s replacement of an earth-centered system by a heliocentric one. For generations of thinkers, God’s supreme perfections had seemed to suggest that the universe He created was likewise flawless and complete when He laid down His celestial instruments. When He pronounced His labors good and rested from His efforts, the perfectly or-

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<sup>7</sup>Wilford Woodruff, Journal, March 10, 1844, in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 331.

<sup>8</sup>Lord Acton, “Review of Sir Erskine May’s *Democracy in Europe*,” 1878, quoted in F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 57.

dered cosmos had naught to do but hum along in sublime harmony until the end of time.

At first, Herschel's astronomical observations through his telescopes of unprecedented power and precision only confirmed the infinitude of God's domain, revealing star systems beyond star systems in unending procession. But Herschel quickly perceived that he was observing a universe in a process of continual disruption, upheaval, and transformation on a colossal scale. He described "extensive combinations," stars in process of "condensation," others in retreat or in collision. "When, at the same time that a cluster of stars is forming in one part of space, there may be another collecting in a different, but perhaps no far distant quarter, which may occasion a mutual approach towards their common center of gravity. . . . As a natural consequence of the former cases, there will be formed great cavities or vacancies by the retreat of the stars towards the various centers which attract them." The whole was a scene of such violent contestation that he admitted surprise that the entirety did not "tend to a general destruction, by the shock of one star's falling upon another."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as one writer has summarized the import of Herschel's shocking discovery, he "completely overturned any residual idea of a stable, overarching, temple-like universe, created once and for all by the great Celestial Architect" and replaced it with a dynamic cosmos of waxing and waning worlds, "fluid movements and changes."<sup>10</sup>

Becoming versus Being, Process versus Perfection, Creation, Time, and Eternity—on diverse interpretations of such principles hang theologies, cosmologies, and philosophical systems. Five years after Herschel's essay, William Blake gave the new age its mantra when he wrote that "without contraries is no progression."<sup>11</sup> The long nineteenth century would see Blake's assertion elaborated across the entire span of intellectual achievement. The Great Chain of Being, unchallenged paradigm of a static, orderly, and harmonious

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<sup>9</sup>William Herschel, "On the Construction of the Heavens," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 75 (1785): 216.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 191–92.

<sup>11</sup>William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," *The Poetical Works of William Blake* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1905), 332.

universe, was buried beneath the emergent model of chaos, flux, radical transformation, and conflict. Thomas Malthus wrote in 1798 that human populations and natural resources were in perpetual collision, resulting in a planetary legacy of famine, disease, and calamity. G. W. Hegel made the violent confrontation of a thesis with its antithesis the interpretive key to human history. Marx made matter rather than spirit the foundational principle, and transformed Hegel's dialectic into the most influential political theory of succeeding generations. Darwin rewrote the human understanding of the natural world and God's place in it by accounting for the diversity and splendor of all creation in terms of unrelenting competition within and between species. If there was one prevailing sense in which Joseph Smith was a child of his age, it was in the avidity with which he translated this Romantic paradigm of *agon*, or struggle, into theological terms. The result pervaded his cosmology, his human anthropology, and even his doctrine of Deity.

To characterize creation as an ongoing project is quintessentially Romantic. Process was for all of them more important than product. Joseph combined the dynamism of Herschel's cosmos with the catastrophism of George Cuvier, when he announced: "This Earth has been organized out of portions of other Globes that [have] been Disorganized," he said. "Organized and formed out of other planets which were broke[n] up and remodeled and made into the one on which we live." He added, "This earth was not the first of God's work," and clearly it would not be the last.<sup>12</sup> As to humans, Joseph makes them co-participants with Deity itself in the ongoing project of world creation. Filtered through Pratt's rhetoric, Joseph's vision seems pure Herschel here as well: "Thus perfected, the whole family will . . . continue to organize, people, redeem, and perfect other systems which are now in the womb of chaos."<sup>13</sup> And even Deity itself becomes at Joseph's hands the most moved, rather than the unmoved, mover—not just in His infinite empathy, not just in His endowment with body, parts, and passions, but in His emergence out of a murky past, in a continuing process, and who will yet continue to advance from glory to glory. Herschel's "Construction of the Heavens"

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<sup>12</sup>William P. McIntire, Minute Book, in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 61.

<sup>13</sup>Parley P. Pratt, "Materiality," *Millennial Star* 6, no. 2 (July 1, 1845): 19–22.

was, in other words, an appropriate prelude, and a resonant counterpart, to the cosmic stories Joseph would unfold.

Joseph was inclined to be off and running with the essence of Romantic religion. There seemed to be a clear impulse on his part to embrace the full implications of a universe of freedom, progress, and limitlessness: no creeds to constrain, no arbitrary rules or rituals to hinder. It was an impulse that animated myriads of his contemporaries. Augustine's position, embraced for a thousand years and more, was no longer tenable. Some ask, he had written, "if it was Adam and Eve who sinned, what did we poor wretches do? . . . My response is brief: let them be silent and stop murmuring."<sup>14</sup> But by the nineteenth century, Calvinism collapsed under the onus of a fire-breathing God. Edward Beecher, son of Lyman and brother to Henry Ward, was himself part of the new wave that rebelled against the traditions of the fathers: "The inherited religious teachings about human nature and human culpability," he wrote, made of our creator a "highly unjust and dishonorable . . . God," and no sophistry or good intent could get around that intractable affront to reason and sensibility.<sup>15</sup>

For Joseph, too, none of the old explanations or authoritarian strictures seemed to apply. "Trying a man for his faith" smacked of sectarianism. "It felt so good not to be trammelled," he wrote. Damning unbaptized children, he said, was "not consistant with the character of God."<sup>16</sup> This true character, he was sure, was not the character of the creedal God.

In one sermon, Joseph went so far as to say that "all who would follow the precepts of the Bible, whether Mormon or not, would assuredly be saved."<sup>17</sup> He added later that even those without knowledge of or obedience to the Bible would be enfolded in the arms of mercy: "God hath made a provision that every spirit can be ferretted

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<sup>14</sup>Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, Book 3, chap. 21, translated by Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 107.

<sup>15</sup>Edward Beecher, *The Conflict of Ages: or, the Great Debate on the Moral Relations of God and Man* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson & Company, 1853), 46.

<sup>16</sup>Wilford Woodruff, Journal, March 20, 1842, quoted in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 107.

<sup>17</sup>Matthew L. Davis, "MS History of the Church, C-1," 194, LDS Church History Library.

out in that world that has not sinned the unpardonable sin.”<sup>18</sup> His vision was flexible, generous, tolerant, and liberal—in perfect harmony with the world of flux and expansiveness Herschel had discovered and that the Romantics so relished.

But let us consider another founding document of Romanticism, one that at first seems in harmony with Herschel’s, but whose eventual repercussions might explain a contrary tendency that was also developing in Joseph’s thought. This second pivotal event occurred slightly earlier in 1757, when Edmund Burke produced an interesting little essay titled, “A Philosophical Inquiry into Our Ideas Concerning the Sublime and the Beautiful.” The sublime had been a characteristic in classical conceptions of rhetoric dating back to Longinus and even earlier, but it had largely fallen into disuse in the English-speaking world. Burke’s timing was superb. He reinvigorated the concept and endowed it with a plethora of meanings and associations that were perfectly calculated to appeal to sensibilities that were already tiring of the sterility and the intellectualism of contemporary philosophers and men of science. The excesses of those secular Enlightenment *philosophes* came to a head in 1793, when Notre Dame Cathedral was repurposed as a Temple of Reason. The problem, as William James insightfully remarked a century later, was that, for some people, “richness is the supreme imaginative requirement,” expressing an “inner need” for something to which we can attach “adjectives of mystery and splendor.”<sup>19</sup> James put his finger precisely on an irrepressible human appetite for the sublime, the mysterious. And if you do away with the *mysterium tremendum* of the creeds, you had better be prepared to put something in its place.

A thoroughgoing rationalist like Samuel Johnson could sniff that “all wonder is the effect of novelty upon ignorance,”<sup>20</sup> but Burke knew better. His treatise was written in reaction to the stolid dourness of Johnsonians and against the rationalism of Descartes and the intellectual rigor of Locke. In his essay on the sublime, Burke explicitly

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<sup>18</sup>William Clayton, Report, April 7, 1844, in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 360.

<sup>19</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Gifford Lectures, 1901; first published in 1902 (Rockville, Md.: Arc Manor, 2008), 334.

<sup>20</sup>Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Most Eminent Poets* (London: J. Buckland, 1787), 3:230.



gloried in obfuscation, darkness, and stupefying wonder. "Hardly any thing can strike the mind with its greatness," he wrote, "which does not make some sort of approach towards infinity; which nothing can do whilst we are able to perceive its bounds; but to see an object distinctly, and to perceive its bounds, is one and the same thing. A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea." In fact, he continued rapturously, "It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration and chiefly excites our passions." Here we enter a world in which the earlier John Milton is the exemplar because, in Milton's work, Burke enthuses, "all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible and *sublime to the last degree*."<sup>21</sup>

The book inspired a seismic shift in aesthetic sensibility. Almost the entirety of Romantic discourse needs to be seen as the thoroughgoing elaboration of Burke's phenomenal achievement. He made it possible to excise God from his commanding presence in educated discourse and seamlessly insinuate, in his stead, mystery, wonder, sublimity. René Chateaubriand was the most popular exploiter of the new sensibility, but dozens could be cited. He wrote rapturously in 1800 that "no circumstance of life is pleasing, beautiful, or grand, except mysterious things. The most wonderful sentiments are those which produce impressions difficult to be explained." Dreamily he characterized "Mystery" as "of a nature so divine," and he glorified what he called "holy ignorance."<sup>22</sup> Chateaubriand epitomized perfectly the strategy by which an entire generation of poets and intellectuals made their peace with the departure of the sacred from their world. They simply reconstituted it in new garb. The catastrophe that this shift invited, and the reverberations of which are still all about us, was the diminishment of the religious and the veneration in its stead of the "spiritual." Religion has been cheapened ever since.

Romanticism was not long in imploding under the weight of its obsession with feeling over intellect, emotion over substance, and selfhood over community. Schiller's experiments in freedom collapse into savage chaos, Byronic individualism becomes Napoleonic despotism, and radical subjectivism becomes Nietzschean amorality.

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<sup>21</sup>Edmund Burke, "Obscurity," in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Montrose, Scotland: D. Buchanan, 1803), 63.

<sup>22</sup>François-René Chateaubriand, *The Beauties of Christianity*, translated by Frederic Shoberl (London: Henry Colburn, 1813), 16–17.

Not all Romantics, of course, became secularists or New Agers. One might trace, unevenly perhaps, some of the consequences of this new sensibility as it plays out within Christianity. Religion is increasingly personalized and interiorized. The privatized spirituality of the pietists becomes the unmediated and unregulated religiosity of Methodism, the Christian version of Romanticism if there ever was one. In another strain, reaction against the God who holds us like spiders over a flame, morphs into the universalism whereby the entire human family is saved, before culminating in the dismissal of hell and Christ both. An epitome of the contemporary afterclap of Romantic thought in the religious sphere is emblazoned on the marquee of a country church I passed in rural Massachusetts inviting passersby to join the worship: "Soft pews, and no hell." And the same new sensibility emerges in the abiding popularity of a little verse by William Blake, a summation of the Romantic sensibility that has served as a virtual mantra for generations of those who confuse discipleship with self-absorption:

To see the world in a grain of sand,  
and heaven in a wildflower  
hold infinity in the palm of your hand,  
and eternity in an hour.

Ironically, it took a Marxist critic, Terry Eagleton, to point out in reference to this verse, that the Gospel of Matthew teaches: "Eternity lies not in a grain of sand but in a glass of water. The cosmos revolves on comforting the sick. When you act in this way, you are sharing in the love which built the stars. To live in this way is not just to have life, but to have it in abundance."<sup>23</sup>

How aware and how concerned was Joseph Smith with this other side of Romantic thought and its repercussions? How self-aware was he of the dangers of a cheapened religiosity? And might we understand his legalism as a gesture in the direction of putting the brakes on the excesses which Burke's treatise portends? In the case of universalism in particular, he was keenly aware of the stakes and dangers.<sup>24</sup> I might argue that Joseph rooted his theology in the opposing grounds of Romantic liberalism on the one hand, with its untram-

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<sup>23</sup>Terry Eagleton, *A Very Short Introduction to the Meaning of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 95.

<sup>24</sup>For example, Joseph Smith owned Henry Tappan's *Review of Ed-*

meled freedom, and legalistic frameworks with their laws and ordinances on the other, to avoid the excesses of both. These imperatives could go by many names: I have been referring to them as Romanticism and legalism; but let us think of them instead as love and law.

But another way to resolve the conundrum might be to see Joseph's emphasis on law as a guarantee of freedom, not its antithesis. But it's a tragic guarantee. To look more closely at a particular moment law seems to oppose but actually guarantees generosity of heart, let us look at the problem of universal salvation. The universalist agenda began with the premise that God, being full of love, would never have created the human race, "unless he intended to make them finally happy."<sup>25</sup> Joseph pushed the imperative toward universal salvation further than any of his contemporaries, because his God was more moved by compassion than any contemporary God. "The idea that God cannot suffer, [was] accepted virtually as axiomatic in Christian theology from the early Greek Fathers until the nineteenth-century."<sup>26</sup> Another concurs that it was only "toward the end of the nineteenth century [that] a sea of change began to occur within Christian theology such that at present many, if not most, Christian theologians hold as axiomatic that God . . . does undergo emotional changes of states, and so can suffer."<sup>27</sup> Joseph, of course, pronounced not only that God felt love, but that He wept real tears, as the most moved, not unmoved, mover.

But in loving man enough to give him his agency, God set up the conditions for a tragic universe. Here is how the dilemma unfolds. Man, in his freedom, chooses sin. The freedom to sin collides with God's desire to save. The two leading figures of early Universalism resolved the problem by simply declaring that any hell or torment would be temporary. That still left the problem of the biblical language of

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wards's *"Inquiry into the Freedom of the Will"* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1839) and virtually paraphrased John Murray's words in *Doctrine and Covenants* 19.

<sup>25</sup>Charles Chauncy, *Mystery Hid from Ages . . . , or, the Salvation of All Men* (London: Charles Dilly, 1784), 1.

<sup>26</sup>Richard Bauckham, "'Only the Suffering God Can Help': Divine Passibility in Modern Theology," *Themelios* 9, no. 3 (April 1984): 6.

<sup>27</sup>Thomas G. Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 35.

eternity and everlastingness. To get around this problem, and using language that Joseph would later echo, John Murray argues that “it is one thing to be punished with everlasting destruction, and another to be everlastingly punished with destruction.” The pain of a candle flame, he clarified, is brief, but the pain is still “everlasting fire.”<sup>28</sup> Eventually, Murray and Chauncy both conceded, all humans would have to come to Christ to be saved. “’Tis true,” Chauncy conceded, God “will not, in *this state*, prevail upon *all* willingly to bow down before him as their *Lord*. . . . May he not, . . . use means with sinners in the *next state*, in order to make them *good subjects* in the *moral kingdom* of God . . . ?”<sup>29</sup> Murray concurred that the great work of salvation would have to take place in the next realm. Opponents protested: “Now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation; you may not have another.”<sup>30</sup> Murray replied that, indeed, “now” will always be “the accepted time,” and there will always be a “now.”<sup>31</sup> Notice that, in both cases, they fail to resolve the problem of how choice will be reconciled with reward. They just defer the problem, in order to blithely assert a universal salvation.

Joseph comes close to their position, of course. So close, that some members apostatized over Section 76, received in early 1832, and Brigham Young’s brother Joseph protested initially that it seemed everybody would be saved. Almost everybody. The explanation of why everybody could not be saved came almost a year later, with Section 88, which reflected Joseph’s most profound statement on law, freedom, and the cost of moral agency: “That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin, cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still” (D&C 88:35).

Hell does not exist because of some inflexible ultimatum decreed by an impersonal Justice. Reward and punishment are entailed not simply because that is the “fair” or “just” thing for God to do. For

<sup>28</sup>John Murray, *Letters and Sketches of Sermons* (Boston: Joshua Belcher, 1813), 3:352.

<sup>29</sup>Charles Chauncy, *The Mystery Hid from Ages and Generations Made Manifest... or, the Salvation of All Men* (1784; rpt., Bedford, Mass.: Applewood, 2009), 191.

<sup>30</sup>An unnamed disputant quoted by Murray, *Sermons*, 2:40.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:254.

God is also merciful, and if humans can remit a penalty out of compassion or mercy, why cannot God? Because, as Alma explains, such apparent generosity would undermine the essence of that agency on which moral freedom depends. Consequences are chosen at the time actions are freely committed. To choose to indulge a desire is to choose its fruit—bitter or sweet—assuming, as Lehi did, that “men are instructed sufficiently” to understand what they are choosing (2 Ne. 2:5). So following the exercise of such agency, “the one [must be] raised to happiness according to his desires of happiness, or good according to his desires of good; and the other to evil according to his desires of evil” (Alma 41:5). It is a truth that harks back to Dante’s grim vision of hell, in which God is not present as Judge or dispenser of punishments, because choices are allowed, inexorably, to bear their own fruit. In Alma’s *Inferno* as well, future states are chosen, not assigned: “For behold,” says Alma, “they are their own judges” (Alma 41:7).

Law, in this vision, is the glue that binds actions to their consequences, and thus guarantees the validity of agency. It is not about justice. It is about meaningful freedom. A universal clemency would not compromise justice. It would void agency. To bestow universal salvation, would be to impose on a moral agent a consequence he did not will, that is, did not choose, to receive. Joseph understood that Satan’s tool against agency was not targeted coercion, but unfiltered acquiescence. (We have largely lost this understanding Joseph had of the War in Heaven, in which the adversary’s plan was to remit consequences and thereby void agency, not obliterate it through force).

The painful consequences of law are where tragic creation comes in. C. S. Lewis, with painfully overcautious moral probing, offered this meditation on Christian orthodoxy: “I am not sure that the great canyon of anguish which lies across our lives is *solely* due to some pre-historic catastrophe. Something tragic may . . . be inherent in the very act of creation.” For this reason, he suggested, “Besides being the Great Creator, . . . perhaps [he is] the Tragic Creator too.”<sup>32</sup>

God is the tragic creator in the sense that Hegel meant, when he said we inhabit a tragic universe, because it is characterized by irreconcilable collisions between competing values, all of which have the right to claim an absolute validity. The tragedy of human existence in

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<sup>32</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer* (1964; rpt., New York: Harcourt, 1991), 91.

particular, is the tragedy of absolute freedom versus perfect love. Love is manifest in the granting of freedom. And law is but the guarantee of freedom.

The tragic cost of this agency is comprehended in all the misery that sin and alienation entail. It is only assured everlastingly in the Sons of Perdition, and Joseph's conception of agency and law suggest that their punishment has little to do with the gravity of their sin, *per se*, because the description of their sin makes clear that Christ's atonement can extend only to those whose choices are made with an imperfect or compromised will. Which means virtually all of humankind. Our choices, in other words, are usually made with imperfect clarity and flawed understanding. Only the unpardonable sin, against perfect light, committed with untainted deliberation, in full and utter knowledge of its meaning and repercussions, is the sin against the Holy Ghost. It cannot be forgiven *not* because it is so grievous or offensive, but because it is the only sin a human can make with no mitigating circumstances. All other sins are performed "through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12), as it were, without a perfect understanding, on an uneven playing field, where to greater or lesser degree the weakness of the flesh, of intellect, or of judgment intrudes. In all such cases, regret and reconsideration are conceivable. Only the choice of evil made in the most absolute and perfect light of understanding admits no imaginable basis for reconsideration or regret—which are, of course, at the root of the very meaning of repentance.

And so the law, for Joseph Smith, was not the opponent of freedom, but its ally. What at times could appear legalism might, in a broader context be seen as his resistance to the well-intentioned but disastrous illusion of an ungrounded human autonomy. The ordinances provided an unchanging framework giving continuity to our relationship to the divine. God not only revealed all the ordinances of salvation to Adam, Joseph taught, but He intended them "to be the same forever, and set Adam to watch over them [and] to reveal them from heaven to man or to send Angels to reveal them" in the event of their loss.<sup>33</sup> Their unvarying employment was the token of a covenant that binds us to premortal conventions we participated in creating: They constitute "the most perfect order and harmony—and their limits and bounds were fixed irrevocably and voluntarily subscribed

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<sup>33</sup>Robert B Thompson, October 5, 1840, in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 39.

to.”<sup>34</sup> This is why, in Joseph’s words, we “have got to be subject to certain rules & principles” established “before the world was.”<sup>35</sup> These rules and principles, of course, are often ritually introduced and affirmed, and that usually happens in the context of covenant making. The ritualistic dimension of this covenant making occurs in the school of the prophets, baptism, the sacrament, and the temple. The ritualistic saturation, the logical culmination of Joseph’s legalistic bent, oriented around these preordained “rules and principles,” allows disciples to enact in dramatic fashion very specific choices tied to very particular consequences. I want to emphasize this point, because I think it gives an important context for understanding Joseph’s constant linking of ritual to covenants. Ritual is in this sense not merely symbolic activity, but mimetic performance. The bodily dimension to ritual gives the action a particular efficacy. Insofar as it concretizes deliberate choice, it transforms inchoate desire into somatic form. Covenant is the verbal, and ritual the performative, recognition of law’s benevolent dominion.

As a student of literature, I ask your indulgence for ending with a literary coda. If Joseph had one contemporary who shared his concerns about the dangers of unfettered freedom and what I have called law’s benevolent dominion, it was William Wordsworth, who toured revolutionary France and came to recoil in horror from what he saw. The revolutionary dream had turned nightmare, and he wrote a great “Ode to Duty” in which he recognized the illusory bliss of what he called “unchartered freedom,” the “weary strife” it engendered, and the law as the “Godhead’s most benignant grace.”<sup>36</sup> But it was in a simpler sonnet that he captured the essential paradox of Romanticism and legalism, of love and law.

“Nuns Fret Not,” he called the sonnet. The poet here finds an apt allegory in the seeming constraints that poetic rules and forms impose on the impulse toward free expression. His words about poetic discipline seem an appropriate summation of Joseph’s apparent

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<sup>34</sup>“Minutes of a Special Conference,” *Times and Seasons* 4 (September 15, 1843): 331.

<sup>35</sup>Willard Richards, scribe for Joseph Smith, Diary, October 1843, in Ehat and Cook, *The Words of Joseph Smith*, 254.

<sup>36</sup>William Wordsworth, “Ode to Duty,” in *Complete Poetical Works* (New York: Crowell, n.d.), 245.

belief that the fullest expression of agency can only unfold within the context of a certain religious rigor.

In part, it reads:

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;  
And hermits are contented with their cells;  
And students with their pensive citadels;  
. . . In truth the prison, unto which we doom  
Ourselves, no prison is.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps, Wordsworth concludes, "some Souls . . . who have felt the weight of too much liberty, should find brief solace there, as I have found."

For Joseph Smith's followers, of course, the solace is eternal.

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<sup>37</sup>Wordsworth, "Nuns Fret Not," in *ibid.*, 395.